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## OUR EARLIEST ENGLISH MASTERPIECE

Why is the *Beowulf* taught to-day in our colleges? Why do our literary historians discuss it, and our poets read it? Why this present article on so remote a subject? Because the *Beowulf* is the earliest English masterpiece? Very well, but is this earliest masterpiece worth reading? If so, why do we not read it, except under compulsion?

### I.

But again, regardless of popularity, what is the real value of this poem, the *Beowulf*? The unlearned and the learned are alike vague in their answers. "The *Beowulf*," says one, "oh yes, great literature for that people in that age, but crude." It is the opinion of the average critic, who in all probability has never read a line of it, except in a translation,—which is like looking at a red rose through blue glasses. At the other extreme are the philologists. When a philologist approaches this subject, too often he leaves behind all sense of comparative values, and focuses his microscope solely upon the *Beowulf* and its contemporaries. The result is characteristic. As the contemporaries are mostly worthless, the *Beowulf* looms by contrast to prodigious and Homeric proportions. To the reader whose interest is primarily in literary, not in philological, values, these extreme decisions are equally unsatisfactory. That the *Beowulf* is not the yawp of a savage, but literature worth reading, is a commonplace. On the other hand, it is certainly not one of the first among the great epics of the world. Where then is its place in literature?

Again, what is the character of this enigmatic poem? To many critics anything old is the source of an archæologically æsthetic thrill. There is about it something unreal, and stagey, and alluring. Read some of our recently written "Old French" romances. Notice how the figures strut across their tinsel stage, bearing only the faintest resemblance to the real heroes and heroines of the *Romans d'Aventure* or the *Chansons de Geste*. That sort of criticism is often applied to the *Beowulf*. That the

men of Anglo-Saxon literature were as human as we are, and that their writing was as spontaneous and vital as the novels of Frank Norris or Edith Wharton are to us, these critics never suspect. All life, to them, is a stage, on which literary types play their parts according to preconceived ideas. From this school we can evidently get nothing of the spirit of the *Beowulf*.

If we turn to the philologists we are not much better off. We ask, for example, if the *Beowulf* is a part of the great epic tradition of mankind: does it show us the mystery of blind mankind wandering in darkness, or the tragedy of death and its night-dark hereafter? Is there about it the sublimity of a human character rising above the gloom of world-wide ignorance and helplessness? There is no answer from philology; though we are told that the poem has repeated phrases, recurring allusions, and such like, and that these are signs of an epic style. Analysis there is, among the philologists, of the majesty and music of the verse form. But except for this, there is little explanation of the spirit of the poem.

The question, then, for the literary reader is not the position of the *Beowulf* in literary history, not the manners and customs of the people for whom it was composed, not even the question of whether it be all by the same hand or by different hands. Still less it is a question of archaic thrills. The question is: first, What is the absolute value of the poem as literature when compared with the *Faerie Queen* and *Paradise Lost*, the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Idyls of the King*; second, What is the meaning of the poem to us, not as historians of the twentieth century, but merely as men? It is certainly not the purpose of this modest discussion to answer these questions. But some ideas may be added to our restricted store upon the topic, and our present vagueness as to it may perhaps be a little cleared.

## II.

The facts that need to be known concerning the work, before we approach it with reference to these questions, cannot be stated in a short essay. But a few may be pointed out for the benefit of those to whom the poem is wholly strange.

The origins are very uncertain. The characters which can be identified are taken from German mythology and history, though

there is a possibility that some were obtained, in a mysterious and as yet unexplained way, from classical stories. The events narrated may have been taken from some ancient epos, either Germanic or Latin; but the details, the scenery, and the customs are native to Denmark. Whether the poem was written in a Scandinavian dialect and later translated into Anglo-Saxon, or was written originally in the English tongue, whether the bard was Christian or pagan, are undecided questions. So, important as they are, we may pass them over.

The essentials of the plot may be given in few words. The scene is laid in Scandinavian lands. Hrothgar, king of the Danes, has built a new and resplendent banquet-hall, but finds it harried by a monster, Grendel, who inconsiderately devours a warrior every night. As this both wrings the Danes' hearts and threatens to deplete the army, great consternation as well as personal terror prevail. At about this time, however, Beowulf, a young Geatish warrior hears of their distress, and resolves to champion it. Beowulf's own youth has been undistinguished, except for a remarkable swimming feat, and doubtless he hopes by this expedition to retrieve his reputation. At the Danish court the young warrior, whose family is known to the king, is hospitably entertained. The king accepts Beowulf's championship, many fine speeches are made, and the queen graciously passes the mead-cup. Then, as night falls, all retire, Beowulf among them, waiting for the monster. Nor is he disappointed; for soon,

In dark night came  
Striding the shadow-goer.  
Quickly, and first of all, he seized  
A sleeping warrior, rent him unawares.

Inflamed with blood, he starts to seize another, but here he blunders, for the other happens to be Beowulf, who, having refused a sword, rises up to the fray and tears out the arm of the monster, who flies in agony to die in his den. Among the Danes all is rejoicing, and the court bard, who appears to have burst into song upon every occasion of rejoicing, relieves his feelings in a long chant about Sigemund and Fitela, whose deeds are suggested by Beowulf's. The banquet hall is adorned

for festivities, Beowulf receives presents from the king, and the bard again bursts into song.

But the troubles are not over, for Grendel has a mother, who manifests the habits of her son. Beowulf slays her also, seeking her out in her den deep under the waters of a wild, dark fen in the wilderness. Then, after narrating his new exploits and receiving gifts from the king to bear to his people, he departs.

In the second part of the poem, which may possibly have been written separately and afterwards appended, Beowulf, now a prince in his own land, fights with a fire-monster, who, having been stirred up by accident, is devastating the country. In the fight the monster is slain, but Beowulf loses his own life. His body is burned on a funeral pyre by the sea; and with the erection of a beacon to commemorate the spot ends the poem.

### III.

We come then to the question, For what does the *Beowulf* stand in world-literature, what is its contribution to the universal and enduring conception of life and conception of beauty?

That the poem as a whole is incoherent, digressive, and totally lacking in plot-organization, must be admitted. To say that the poet had no means, in his day, of knowing how to compose a plot, is not to the purpose. Regardless of what information he had, the fact that he could not build a plot marks his production as primitive to that extent; therefore, from the standpoint of absolute values, to that extent weak. Were the architectonic qualities of the *Beowulf* the only ones to be considered, the poem would be a matter merely of antiquarian interest. But, fortunately for our great epic, there is something more to a verse story than plot-construction.

We cannot go into the subject of the rhythm of the poem, as it would involve us in too many technicalities. Suffice it to say that the rhythm is as perfect of its sort, as polished, as artificial even, as Milton's. There is not the slightest trace of that crudity which ignorance has attributed to it. That the language is harsh, and the system of metrics intrinsically inferior to the Latin and to the modern English, may be conceded, without its being granted that they are any the less beautiful enough to be intrinsically and in themselves worth while. The strength and

swing, and even variety, of the Anglo-Saxon metre, are things for which we may look in vain in classic or in later tongues, and things without which universal literature would be distinctly the poorer. That this peculiar metre has not survived is due less to any real weakness or defect in it than to the fact that no modern language of civilization retains the strongly accentual and explosive form of utterance which was essential to its use. In the matter of rhythm, then, though the *Beowulf*, judged by absolute standards, is distinctly inferior to the verse of classic or later languages, yet the inferiority is far less than is ordinarily supposed, and is in some measure compensated for by the fact, that no other metre is capable of expressing exactly the strength and swing of this. To take an hypothetical, but just, test, suppose that modern literature were to produce a counterpart of the *Beowulf*, in a similar metre. In the matter of rhythm, we should adjudge it inferior to *Paradise Lost* and to most of Tennyson, Shelley, or Keats. But we would not spurn it as merely primitive, any more than we spurn the *vers libre* or Whitman's lines; and we would rate it considerably above either. Such metre, then, has a distinct value, and a value not far below the best.

But there is a third quality of verse as important as either organization or rhythm. It is the aptness, force, and beauty of the scene when considered in detail, and the quality of the language in which they are sketched. And here we come to the noblest traits of the *Beowulf*.

To take a single quality, the picturesque, that is the vividness and freshness of the scenes. Other poems have longer or more fully developed pictures, carefully and often painfully elaborated. But the *Beowulf* scenes are oftentimes equally strong, and yet require no such careful elaboration. They have the brevity and force of epigrams. There is something essentially Shakespearean in the ability, the knack, the trick if you will, of producing effects of tremendous vividness in a few flashing words. For example, take any one of the descriptive passages from Shakespeare, as this from *Midsummer Night's Dream*:

The starry welkin cover thou anon  
With drooping fog, as black as Acheron,

Compare with this the similar swift effectiveness of the *Beowulf*. The warriors were prepared for battle with Grendel, when,

Over all darkening night  
Came striding, the dim shadow-shapes,  
Black under the clouds.

Or again, compare these two passages. The Shakespearean—from *Macbeth*—is richer in allusion and figure, but scarcely in the sort of vividness that belongs to a picture:

Now o'er the one half-world  
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates  
Pale Hecate's offerings; and wither'd murder,  
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost.

The situation in the other passage is similar. Grendel, the monster, is going to the Danes' hall for his nightly slaughter:

In dark night came  
Striding the shadow-goer. The warriors slept  
That were to hold the hornèd hall,  
All but one.  
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Then from the moor under the misty slopes  
Came Grendel going—God's anger he bore upon him—  
He thought to himself that he would seize unawares  
One of the men in the high hall.  
So fared he forth 'neath the clouds to where he well knew  
Was the wine-hall, the gold-hall of men,  
Shining with plates of gold.

At other places the poem reminds us more of Homer. For example, on the first approach of Beowulf to Heorot, the hall of the Danish King, the watch by the sea, who has challenged the Geats on their landing, says:

Let your battle-shields here await you,  
And your wooden spears.

Beowulf then goes to the hall:

The great chieftain then arose,—around him stood his warriors,  
The brave band of thanes; some abode there,  
And kept the armor, as the chieftian bade.

The others hurried forward together; the guide directed them  
Under Heorot's roof: boldly went Beowulf  
Stern under his helmet, till he stood in the hall;  
Then he spoke—the chain-mail shone upon him,  
The linked net-work, forged by the smith,—  
'Be thou, Hrothgar, hail.'

Again we have the same effect, when Beowulf has returned  
from killing Grendel's mother, and has brought the head of the  
monster with him:

Then, as morning light  
Came o'er the land, many a varlet went  
Brave now in mind to the high hall  
To see the rare wonder; the king himself also,  
Famous for his virtues, the guardian of treasures,  
Strode from his bridal-chamber with high mien  
With a great crowd; and his queen with him  
Measured the mead-path with a bevy of maidens.

In other places we get touches which remind us of the mystic,  
horror-loving spirit of the Middle Ages. As, for example, in the  
attack of Grendel:

The door, fast though it was with fire-wrought bolts,  
Sprang wide when he touched it.  
The mad fiend burst in rage  
The portal of the hall, straightway  
On the particolored floor trod  
Raving; in his eyes shone  
A loathsome light likest to flame.  
In the hall he saw many warriors,  
The allies gathered together, the band of kinsmen,  
All asleep; then laughed in spirit  
The dire monster, for he thought  
That, ere day came, of every one  
He would tear out the life from the body.

The same spirit appears in the description of the mere where  
Grendel's mother lives:

Not far hence  
In miles standeth the mere.  
Over it hang frosty groves  
That, clinging by their roots, lean over the water.  
There every night may be seen a strange wonder,  
A fire upon the water; nor doth there live one of the sons of men  
So wise that he knoweth the bottom.  
Though the strong-hornèd stag, the heath-roamer,  
Pressed by hounds in a long chase



May seek the wood, yet sooner will he give up his life  
 On the bank, than in that mere  
 Hide his head. That's no unhaunted place!  
 Thence the boiling of waters mounteth up  
 Dark to the clouds, when the wind riseth  
 And harsh storms, when the air groweth dark,  
 And the heavens weep.

More often, though, the spirit seems one that recalls no other literature very strongly. Take, for example, the queen's courtesies to Beowulf and the other warriors, when he is first entertained in the Danish hall:

Then Wealhtheow stepped forth,  
 The gold-adorned queen of Hrothgar, a noble woman.  
 Mindful of courtesies she greeted  
 The men in the hall, and passed the mead-cup,  
 First to the champion of the East-Danes,  
 Whom she bade be blithe at the beer-drinking.  
 Dear to his people he was. In joy received  
 The triumphant king the food and the hall-cup.  
 Round then went the Helming's lady  
 To all old and young,  
 And gave costly gifts, until she came,  
 The ring-adorned queen noble in mind,  
 To Beowulf. She bore to him the mead-cup,  
 Greeted the Geat's chieftain, and thanked God  
 With wise words that her wish was granted  
 That she should have a champion  
 In her woe. The mighty warrior  
 Took the cup from Wealhtheow's hands,  
 And, elate for battle, spoke.

Again, in the same connection we may be permitted one more somewhat lengthy quotation. It is of the sort that is used by pseudo-antiquarians to produce archaic thrills. Needless to say, the passage, despite the element of strangeness and sombreness, had all the reality to the Anglo-Saxon that—say a military funeral has to us. Only you must substitute for the dim colors of the cathedral aisle the melancholy of the misty northern glow on the sea-cape. The passage is practically the closing one of the poem, though the poet takes nine lines more to bring it to an end:

Then was borne the prince,  
 The hoary man of battle, to Hronesness (Whale's Point).  
 Then made the Geats for him  
 A pyre firmly built on the ground.

They hung it about with helmets and shields  
And bright coats of chain-mail, as he had asked.  
Then in the midst the mourning warriors  
Laid the mighty prince, their belovèd lord.  
There on the hill they kindled  
The greatest of all bale-fires: the wood-smoke rose up  
Black over the pile, and swirling flames,  
Mingled with wails.

There on the hill-top the people of the Weather-Geats  
Built a tumulus; it was high and broad  
That sailors might see it from afar.  
Thus they built—in ten days—  
The warrior's beacon: the dead ashes  
They surrounded with a wall, as worthily  
As skill could do it.  
In the mound they placed the rings and jewels,  
All the treasures rapt from the dragon's hoard.  
They let the earth hold that treasure of earls,  
The gold in the ground, where it still lies,  
As useless to men as it was before.  
Then round the tumulus rode the warriors,  
The noble-born, twelve in all,  
Bewailing their sorrow and grieving for the king.

The spirit is plainly not Shakespearean, not Homeric, not in the customary sense mediæval. It is a native Anglo-Saxon spirit, tremendously impassioned, but withal calm, restrained, and melancholy. It is a spirit that lies too near the heart for words, and so, feeling the cheapness of language, expresses itself in commonplaces that ring from the very depths of life and are resonant with its mystery and its melancholy.

In the same spirit are many of the allusions to fate. The religion of the poem is fatalism tinctured with Christianity. The fatalistic conception comes out in many places; for example, in a remark with which Beowulf ends a speech addressed to Hrothgar. It is just before the fight with Grendel, and Beowulf requests that if he be slain, his burnie, or coat of chain armor, be sent to Hygelac, his sovereign and uncle. Then he adds, "Goes aye fate as it will." (*Gæth ā wyrd swā hīo scel.*) In another place the poet says:

It is not easy  
To elude death (try it who will),  
But every one of soul-gifted men, of the earth-dwellers,  
Shall come to the fated spot.

There his body fast in his death-bed  
Shall sleep after this feast.

Sometimes the poet is at pains to explain that though fate (*wyrd* or *wierd*) is ordinarily supreme, God may overrule it. Some critics hold this to prove that the poem is a pagan writing interpolated,—and so rendered theologically innocuous,—by a later Christian redactor.

Finally, among the more important strong qualities to be found in the *Beowulf*, is the spontaneous reality of the character-drawing. There are no fine distinctions, but elemental traits are handled with naïve vigor, and put into the right places. Sometimes the character element is entirely obvious, as in the exclamation:

So it is sorrowful to an agèd churl  
To live to see his bairn hang  
Young on the gallows.

But more frequently the obvious trait is one of the sort that make us wonder why we never thought of it ourselves. For example, when Beowulf first offers to champion the Danes against Grendel, Hunferth, a local hero, is moved with jealousy, and addresses Beowulf in very much the tone of the jeering small-boy, who explains to the other that he has an exaggerated conception of himself ("Aw, you aint so fine"). He recalls to mind a swimming match in which Beowulf was defeated. Here we should expect the hero of divine lineage to keep contemptuous silence. But not so. Beowulf is human,—and explains at great length that he was not defeated, after which he ends with a malicious dig at Hunferth by recalling the fact that that redoubtable warrior had stained his career by the murder of his brothers, an incident that has nothing to do with the question of valor, and which shows an almost feminine irrelevancy of repartee.

Another humanizing touch appears, naïvely and without apparent guile on the part of the bard, in the frequent allusions to braggadocio and love of praise among the warriors. There is something childlike about the simple emotions of most of them. It is probably this note that rings in the closing words of the poem, when the companions of Beowulf, in praising the dead hero, end by declaring him—in terms of high laudation,—

To his folk most kind and fondest of praise.

Often times the character-effect appears, in this way, in the turn of a phrase merely. At the banquet of the Danes, given for Beowulf,

The ring-adorned queen,  
Noble in mind, the mead-cup bore.

How much more significant that terse phrase "Noble in mind" than any possible description of her "majestic bearing," her "courtly grace," or other similar descriptive qualities. Another effective, but more sombre, bit of character realization occurs in the picture of the aged warrior, who, many years before the time of the story, buried the dragon's hoard of treasure. The old man, lonely, bereft of friends, discouraged rather than disillusioned, but none the less weary of life, sadly puts away his treasure:

There's no joy of harp,  
No joy of glee-wood, nor does the good hawk  
Fly through the hall, nor the swift horse  
The castle court paw.

#### IV.

We have, then, in the *Beowulf* at least five distinct strong points of spirit or temper: a sort of Shakespearean vividness of scene, Homeric simplicity of narrative, mediæval mysticism, native force, and an elementary but very much alive element of character-drawing. Against these, though, must be set—besides the lack of organization—a further defect of detail, a defect of excessive digression and parenthesis. This is a trait of Anglo-Saxon poetry in general rather than of the *Beowulf*. Yet it cannot but be considered a national weakness of the period. This trait shows itself most noticeably in the little moralizing asides which the poet irritatingly thrusts between exciting passages of action or adventure, when he should go straight ahead, oblivious alike of himself and of his sentiments. The last part of the poem sins more in this respect than the first, which may, perhaps, though doubtfully, lend color to the supposition that it is a later addition. But even if this supposition be true, the fault is not wholly with the redactor, for many of the digressions are woven into the poem in such manner as almost to preclude the idea of interpolation. Perhaps, though, we should not

quarrel too much with a minstrel — who was probably an old man with all the characteristics of age,—if he fall into the bad habit of digressing to give good advice. It was dramatically in keeping with his character, though the result may be defective literature.

In a few cases the digressions of this sort are not bad, as when the bard, after describing Beowulf's preparation to fight with the fire-dragon single-handed, pauses to exclaim, "Such is no coward's work." In fact, we have clear evidence that this digressiveness is part of a distinct and consistent style, which characterizes the whole poem. Though a defect, it is a defect peculiar to that style, a fact which can scarcely be omitted from consideration. The style itself is the story-teller's style, the sort of thing that survives to-day, in modified form, in children's stories. It is a style similar to that of the fairy-tale—about the dragon and the prince — told to the children some howling winter night about the blazing fireside. The surest evidence of this is the presence of those very asides. Also exclamatory asides, such as "That was a good king!" "That was no coward's work!" Another significant phrase, which the poem shares with most Anglo-Saxon poems, is the introductory "I have heard it told that;" as we say to-day in our stories, "I have heard that once upon a time."

Again the bard is colloquial in his anticipations of what is to come. Before Grendel is slain, he says,

It no longer was fated  
That he more of the race of man  
Might devour by night.

Before the fight with the dragon, the anticipatory remarks become so numerous as to suggest conscious art rather than a merely instinctive colloquial style. Before the dragon fight is recounted, the bard intimates that Beowulf is about to die: and that intimation is given, not once, but at five different points of the narrative. The concluding scene of the whole epic is too tremendous in import for the reader to be allowed merely to blunder into it as into an accidental adventure. He is carefully prepared for it, and his mind by anticipatory sorrow is brought

into just that state in which the foreseen tragedy shall come, not as an adventure, but as a mighty, melancholy, and passionate climax.

Often he uses the device common to the recounter of a long story — of reminding his hearers of the preceding events. In three places he reminds his hearers of the fate of Grendel, though he has himself already narrated the whole event in detail. The strange legend that Grendel is descended from Cain is also repeated when the poet comes to Grendel's mother. Near the end of the poem, when Beowulf's companion in the dragon-fight sees him dying, the poet — though he has already killed off the dragon — pauses to repeat:

There too lay the slayer,  
The dreadful earth-dragon, his life gone,  
All crushed in ruin. No more should the old writhing serpent  
Rule over the jewel-treasures.  
The iron edge of the sword had snatched them away from him,  
The hard battle-hacked work of the hammer.  
The far-flying ranger, quieted by wounds,  
Fell on the earth near his treasure chamber;  
No more should he go leaping through the air  
At midnight; no more, proud of his riches,  
Parade himself. But to earth he fell  
By the hand of the warrior-prince.

These repetitions and anticipations of the story have been taken to indicate the work of a bungling redactor. When, however, the *recitative* character of the poem and of its style is once recognized, and the literary effect is fully appreciated, these qualities of the poem appear entirely in keeping with the spirit of the whole, which is that of the spoken or chanted story.

Such are, in a few dashes of the brush, the best and the worst features of the poem. That, despite its unquestioned defects, it is a great poem, is a conviction that is taking ever firmer hold upon competent critics. Entirely lost to sight at one time, barely escaping annihilation at another, when the sole manuscript copy was singed in a library fire, delayed in its progress to recognition when the first edition, lying in manuscript in the study of a Danish scholar, was destroyed by the British bombardment of Copenhagen;—surely few poems have had more romantic careers, or have been saved to us so nearly as by miracle. Surely

some diabolic power has pursued it with his antagonism. But, as the poet himself says, "Goes aye fate as it will;" and there are signs that the fate which makes or unmakes the popularity of poems, is slowly relenting towards this the most ancient, the most native poem of the English language.

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